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SORDELLO

FREDERIC MAY HOLLAND

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1938

SORDELLO

A STORY FROM ROBERT BROWNING

BY

FREDERIC MAY HOLLAND
AUTHOR OF THE "REIGN OF THE STOICS"

NEW YORK
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
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SORDELLO.

NEARLY seven hundred years ago the river Mincio formed around Mantua a great marsh, which separated the city from the low mountains covered with firs, larches, and rings of vineyard, among which stood the little castle of Goito. In that lonely fortress might have been seen a slender boy, in a loose page's dress, coming every sunset to sit beside each one, in turn, of the patient, marble girls who lay or crouched beneath a cumbrous font in one of the vaults, or watching the thievish birds at work among the grapes in autumn, or lurking, in the stormy winter evenings, beside the arras, and lifting a light with both hands to the embroidered forms of the ancestors of Eccelino da Romano, surnamed il Monaco, a Ghibelline prince whose wife, Adelaide, was mistress of Goito. Her own apartments were closed against

our hero, who was known only as the orphan child of Elcorte, an archer who, soon after the boy's birth in 1194, when the imperialists were driven out of Vicenza amid great slaughter and conflagration, had laid down his own life in saving his mistress, Adelaide, and her new-born son, afterward famous as Ecelin the Cruel.

We find Sordello wandering at will over the rest of the castle, with its dim, winding stairs and maze of corridors contrived for sin, through the ravines down which slip the streamlets singing softly, and amid the forests of maples, myrtles and evergreens, which cover the hills that look toward Mantua. His calm brow, delicate nostrils, and sharp, restless lips, show that he is

“Foremost in the regal class
Nature has broadly severed from her mass
Of men and framed for pleasure, as she frames
Some happy lands that have luxurious names
For loose fertility ; a footfall there
Suffices to upturn to the warm air
Half-germinating spices ; mere decay
Produces richer life ; and day by day
New pollen on the lily-petal grows,

And still more labyrinthine buds the rose.
You recognize at once the finer dress
Of flesh that amply lets in loveliness
At eye and ear, while round the rest is furled
(As though she would not trust them with her world)
A veil that shows a sky not near so blue,
And lets but half the sun look fervid through."

To all he saw that was lovely, he gave fresh life from his own soul. His ruling desire was to find something to worship, and bury himself in each external charm ; for he was not one of those strong souls which develop some new form of loveliness within to match each one that is seen without. His whole life was in his fancies.

"As the adventurous spider, making light
Of distance, shoots her threads from depth to height,
From barbican to battlement, so flung
Fantasies forth, and in their centre swung
Our architect,—the breezy morning fresh
Above, and merry,—all his waving mesh
Laughing with lucid dew-drops rainbow-edged."

As he let his rough-hewn bow of ash sink from his aching wrist, he imagined that he had sent a golden shaft hissing through the Syrian

air to strike down some defender of Jerusalem against the crusaders. As he picked grapes and filberts, he dreamed of himself as the young emperor, Frederic the Second, quaffing wine with the Soldan, or looking at the bunch of dates which the titular King of the Holy City sent his imperial son-in-law, to remind him of his promise to reconquer Palestine. Or, again, he fancied himself Apollo, slaying the Python, and wooing Delian girls.

All these inferior idols soon cast off their borrowed crowns before a coming glory. One evening he stumbled by accident on Eccelino's daughter, Palma, who sat thenceforth conspicuous in his world of dreams, with her blue eyes, her rich red lips, and her tresses flowing in a gorgeous shower of gold, so that the ground was bright as with spilt sunbeams. The servants fired his fancy by telling him how Palma had been promised by her father to the Guelf chief, Count Richard St. Boniface, one of the Capulets of Verona, and how the Ghibelline maiden rejected his suit.

At last, as the first pink leaflets bud on the beech, and the larches brighten in the spring

sunrise, Sordello goes forth buoyantly, hoping that to-day's adventure will secure his visioned lady,

" Whose shape divine
Quivered in the farthest rainbow-vapor, glanced
Athwart the flying herons."

On he goes through the brakes of withered fern and over the great morass, shot through and through with flashing waters, each foot-fall sending up a diamond jet. Still Palma seems floating on before him, and he thinks that when he has passed the next wood he will hear her confess her love.

He clears the last screen of pine trees before Mantua, and there, under the walls, amid a gay crowd of men and women, sits his lady, enthroned as Queen of the Court of Love, at which the troubadour, Eglamor, contends for her prize against all comers. The famous minstrel sings of Apollo, but before the people's frank applause is half done, Sordello has begun the true lay with the true end. On flies the song in a giddy race after the flying story, word making word leap forth, and rhyme, rhyme.

As he closes, the people shout, and crowd around him. Then Palma gives him the prize, and also a scented scarf, warm from her own neck, a great golden braid of her hair touching his cheek as she bends over him. He swoons with joy. When he wakes he is back at Goito, but a crown is on his forehead, the gorgeous vesture he has won is heaped up beside him, Palma's scarf is around his neck, and the women tell him that she has chosen him for her minstrel. Eglamor is dead with spite, but the other troubadours have brought home their new chief.

Thus Sordello became one of the most popular of Lombard poets, but he could not remain so. He found his native Italian too crude a language to allow a tithe of his thoughts to reach the ear. He welded on new words, but they proved too artificial and cumbrous. Then again, he tried in vain to rise above the singers who simply tell of the lovely forms they see around them, and to become a poet who, through such pictures, gives revelations of the loveliness in his own nature, so that the hearers shall love in him the love that leads their souls

to perfection. The Mantuans would not see in Sordello any trait of even his meanest hero. Much as they applauded his praise of Montfort's victories over the Albigenses, they did not give him the credit of having any such courage of his own. Moreover, in praising this heresy-hunter, he found himself led into repeating the commonplace opinions prevalent around him ; and when he broke away from them and tried to give original ideas, he was blamed for being too abstruse and not building on the common heart, as a bard should do who was no philosopher. The praise he won as a poet did not seem to him what he merited as a man. He took less pains than before with his verses, and they gained less and less applause. At last his friends told him that his wings seemed to have grown weak, and begged him to soar as high as he could in the song with which he had been chosen to greet the triumphal entrance into Mantua of the famous Ghibelline soldier, Salin-guerra. Sordello wandered about seeking vainly for inspiration, until he reached Goito, where he flung his crown of laurel into the font, and there was no song of welcome for the city's guest.

The minstrel remained silent and solitary in the lonely castle, but in Mantua there was great rejoicing. The sudden death of Adelaide enabled her husband, Eccelino da Romano, to take the step which gave him the surname of the Monk. He entered the cloister, and, as he did so, proclaimed a truce between the imperials, who had been his partisans, and the adherents of the pope. To insure peace, he announced that his daughter, Palma, should be married to Count Richard, and his two sons, Ecelin and Alberic, wed two Guelf ladies, Giglia and Beatrice. It was hatred of these alliances that brought the fiercest of the imperials to Mantua. Salinguerra was then sixty years old ; and he had been fighting against the Guelfs ever since boyhood, when they robbed him of his first love, Linguetta, as they did afterward of his young wife, Retrude, who was a daughter of the emperor, Henry VI, and who disappeared with her infant son in the Vicenza massacre soon after Sordello's birth. At the news of peace he left Naples and his emperor, with whom he had promised to sail as a crusader, and rode half a score of horses dead

in his haste to reach Lombardy. Before he arrived, however, matters had gone so far that he thought it best to pretend to acquiesce in the suspension of hostilities. So he showed no interest in anything but pageants, and even took the place of Palma's father, already a monk, at her betrothal with Count Richard.

But in her he found a kindred spirit, and it was secretly agreed between them that the marriage should be postponed as long as possible and the first pretext for a rupture promptly seized. Accordingly, Palma was still delaying her journey to Verona, where she had promised to marry the count in his palace, when the Guelfs of Ferrara revolted against Salinguerra in his absence, burned his palace, and murdered the wives and children of his adherents. At once they found the old soldier back in their midst, setting street after street on fire, and riding in blood up to his horse's fetlocks. Count Richard hastened with Azzo, Marquis of Este, and other leading Guelfs, to drive Salinguerra out of Ferrara, but permitted himself to be decoyed to a parley, at which he was treacherously taken prisoner. The whole Lombard

League of nearly twenty cities that took the side of the popes against the emperors rose in arms to deliver him from Salinguerra, who strengthened himself at Ferrara with great bands of mercenaries.

Such was the state of things in the autumn of 1224, when Sordello, now thirty years old, met Palma at Verona. She had timed her journey so cunningly as to arrive just after Richard's departure, and thus gain a plausible pretext for charging him with breach of faith. She had sent for her minstrel, who received her summons on the very day on which an earthquake changed the marsh, hitherto formed by the river Mincio around Mantua, into the lake which now laughs there.

Sordello hastened to his mistress, though he thought that she only wished for him to compose the music for her marriage with his rival. He reached Verona while

“A last remains of sunset dimly burned
O'er the far forests, like a torch-flame turned
By the wind back upon its bearer's hand
In one long flare of crimson ; as a bränd,
The woods beneath lay black.”

No eye but the poet's cared for the soft sky. Trumpets were pealing, and alarm-bells booming. The carroccio, a car which carried the city's standard, the crucifix and a great bell into battle, was being dragged into the market-place, where the people were crowded together listening to the fiery speeches of their magistrates, and eager to march against Salinguerra and show that Verona was no unworthy member of the great league.

The count's palace had a dim closet which overlooked this tumult, and there Sordello and Palma sat with their fingers interlocked, while she told him, with a coy, fastidious grace,

“Like the bird's flutter ere it fix and feed,”

how she had pined for some out-soul, as she called it, which should direct all the force that was expanding within her; and how she had accepted him as her lord ever since that April morning when his face, not unknown to her, burst out from all the other faces at the Love Court.

“I was vainly planning how to make you mine,” she says, “when Salinguerra showed

me how to break loose from Count Richard and the Guelfs. My father and brothers have given up the leadership of the Lombard Ghibellines, the best part of our inheritance. You and I will take the vacant place. To-morrow morning I will put on a gay dress like yours, and we will flee together to Ferrara. There Salinguerra will recognize us as his superiors, and help us serve our emperor. Tell me if I am wrong in believing that this cause and this destiny are yours."

Sordello was dumb with joy, and she took flight before he could express his rapture at the knowledge of her love, and the prospect of becoming a king and embodying his own will in this aggregate of souls and bodies, as he had dreamed of doing.

So he and Palma reached Ferrara, and found this lady-city perishing under the violence with which her brutal lovers tried to tear her from each other. A young Guelf was moaning at the sight of a shrivelled hand nailed to the charred lintel of the door-way, within which he had seen his father stand, bidding him farewell. An old Ghibelline howled over a little skull

with dazzling teeth, which he had dug up in the heap of rubbish where his house was burned. A deserter from Salinguerra came back to find his palace razed so adroitly that he did not know the spot, but sat on the edge of a choked-up tank ploughing the mud inside with his feet and singing the song with which the Ecelins rode into battle, until one fierce kick brought up his own mother's face, caught by the thick gray hair about his spur. Another Ghibelline had murdered his brother ; a woman of Ferrara offered to sell her own daughters to Sordello, and he heard Salinguerra boast of burning hostages alive.

The sight of all this suffering led our hero up from dreaming of ruling men to aspiring to serve them. He confessed to Palma, as they talked that night alone beside a smouldering watch-fire, his unwillingness to join the Ghibellines. She urged that the Guelfs were just as cruel ; but he longed to find some better way than that pursued by either faction. One of the sentinels came up and bade him sing of Rome. Sordello welcomed the conception of this city as the point of light from which rays

traversed all the world. In her he saw embodied a plan to put mankind in full possession of their rights. Visions of her laws and her new structures crowded upon him, and he felt himself called to build up her authority. He knew how zealously the popes and bishops had taken the part of the Lombard cities and defended them from emperors and nobles. This cause seemed that of the people against the princes, and of the future against the past.

He faltered as he remembered how slowly Rome was built: the first generation satisfied with their caves, the second shaping their dreams into rafters and door-posts, but not solving the mystery of hinges, later ages bringing a goodly growth of brick and stone, and still later ones giving the world sewers, forums, amphitheatres and aqueducts, until alabaster and obsidian became common, and statues of Jove and Venus rose above the baths. His courage returned, however, as he remembered how rapidly Hildebrand built up the papal power, and how mightily this great pontiff's successors labored, joining strength with strength in the crusades, meeting pernicious strength with

strength in the Lombard League, and almost dispensing with any need of strength in the Truce of God. At last he resolved to imitate these great workers and begin by making a convert of Salinguerra.

Just before sunset he found the old warrior sitting with Palma in his own dreary palace. He had been giving audience to the emperor's envoy, the pope's legate, and the league's ambassadors, and was now complacently planning his next move, and considering what use he should make of the new badge of authority just sent him by his imperial master. Despite sixty years of fighting and scheming, he showed all the nonchalance of youth,

“ So agile, quick
And graceful turned the head on the broad chest
Encased in pliant steel, his constant vest,
Whence split the sun off in a spray of fire
Across the room ; and loosened of its tire
Of steel, that head let breathe the comely, brown,
Large massive locks, discolored as if a crown
Encircled them, so frayed the basnet where
A sharp white line divided clean the hair.
* * * Square-faced,
No lion more ; two vivid eyes, encased

In hollows filled with many a shade and streak
Settling from the bold nose and bearded cheek ;
Nor might the half-smile reach them that deformed
A lip supremely perfect else—unwarmed."

But thirty years of idle dreaming had left Sordello stunted, thin, worn-out, and really aged. He stammered, and was so awkward and bashful, that his speech at first deserved only scoff. Salinguerra, who, careless of his words as he seemed to be, had never been found at a loss for the right one, listened with good-natured contempt to one whom he knew only as an archer's orphan son and Palma's too much favored minstrel. Indeed, the Ghibelline veteran showed such scorn of the advice to release his prisoner, open his gates to the league, and turn Guelf himself, that Sordello was roused to eloquence. He pleaded the cause of the people, whose faces he saw filling the dim chamber, so powerfully that Salinguerra began to admire him and at last determined to make him his ally. Suddenly he flung the emperor's badge around the orator's neck and welcomed him as Palma's husband, head of the Romano family, and leader of the Lombard Ghibellines.

And now, apparently without a single word being spoken, there sprang to light a secret which Palma had heard from her dying stepmother, namely, that Salinguerra's wife and child, who were supposed to have perished in that Vicenza massacre from which Elcorte saved Adelaide at the cost of his own life, had both been rescued. The mother died soon after and was buried secretly in the font at Goito, but the son was kept there in concealment and neglect, under the name of Sordello, as Elcorte's child by this crazy woman, who was jealous of Salinguerra's superiority to her own lord. Palma's knowledge of this treachery had encouraged her to attempt to restore his birth-right to Sordello, whom we will still call by this familiar name.

He sat pale and silent, but his father laughed with joy, as he told how the emperor was going to destroy the papal power and place all Lombardy under a prefect, whom he himself had leave to name. His son must take this office, and reign over not only Lombardy but Tuscany, in virtual independence of Frederic himself. So he ran on, until Palma drew his iron arms.

away from the shrinking shoulders of Sordello, who rose, tried to speak, and then sank back.

They left him, his father reeling dizzily down the narrow stairs into a dim corridor, lighted only by a grating which showed in the west a ragged jet of fierce, gold fire. There he sat down on a stone bench and splintered it with his truncheon, until Palma began to repeat her lover's poems, and tell how all the world loved him and thought that his wan face eclipsed even Count Richard's. Salinguerra drank in every word, as though an angel spoke, and as she finished praising his son,

“ He drew her on his mailed knees, made
Her face a framework with his hands, a shade,
A crown, an aureole : there she must remain
(Her little mouth compressed with smiling pain,
As in his gloves she felt her tresses twitch).”

Soon he kissed her brow, placed her beneath the window, as in the fittest niche for his saint, and began to pace up and down the passage, pouring forth scheme upon scheme of what he would do for her as soon as she should wed that foolish boy.

At last they heard Sordello stamp his foot, and both rushed up stairs to him anxiously, the father taking the lead despite his heavy mail.

Sordello sat gazing at the river, until its sky-like space of water became one richness of stars, and the moon rose slowly to complete the heaven. He felt that he had needed some steady purpose to uplift his soul, as the moon sways the ocean. Lacking such an influence he had been so shaken by every caprice that he had lived without a purpose, and so missed life's crown, while others with not half his strength had finished their work.

“ The Body, the machine for acting Will,
Had been at the commencement proved unfit ;
That for reflecting, demonstrating it
Mankind,—no fitter ; was the Will itself
In fault ? ”

He still wished to serve the people, but really doing it seemed so doubtful that he was sorely tempted to accept the crown his father offered him, and live only for present pleasures, leaving the future out of sight. Then he thought of the sages, champions and martyrs,

who dashed aside the cup of pleasure and so gained the better life which this life conceals. His body was too weak to endure this fierce mental struggle, but it closed by submitting himself entirely to that sole and immutable power which does not forbid us to love aught that is lovely, and which is to be loved as it is revealed in our humanity.

With his last remaining strength he stamped on the emperor's badge. Salinguerra and Palma found it lying under his feet, as he sat there—dead,

“ Under his foot the badge ; still, Palma said,
A triumph lingering in the wide eyes,
Wider than some spent swimmer's if he spies
Help from above in his extreme despair,
And head far back on shoulder thrust, turns there
With short, quick, passionate cry ; as Palma prest
In one great kiss her lips upon his breast,
It beat.”

They laid him beside his mother in the stone font he loved. Nothing now remains of him but a name in the chronicle and a few verses still sung at Asolo. Thus ends the story told in the hope that it may help

“ Some soul see All—
The great Before and After and the small
Now, yet be saved by this, the simplest lore,
And take the single course prescribed before,
As the king-bird, with ages on his plumes,
Travels to die in his ancestral glooms.”

NOTE.

This poem resembles its hero in having too much exuberance of fancy, and too little steadiness of purpose, for success. Indeed, it is one of the most incomprehensible in all literature. Sordello's character, aspirations and adventures are not such as can easily be made intelligible, even in the simplest prose, and to the difficulties necessary on account of the subject are added several others occasioned by the treatment. In the first place, there is at least one bad misprint in the American edition; namely, in the second line on page 215, which speaks of

“A child barefoot and rosy. She !”

This apparently refers to a girl, but five lines later the child is called “that boy,” and it is impossible to find out what “She” is meant. The latest English edition, however, shows that “She” should be “See!” The punctuation is peculiar and puzzling,

especially in its paucity of commas and profusion of dashes and parentheses. There are a great many rare words like carroch, phanal, trabea, fulgurant, demiurge, miramoline, mollitious, stibadium, raunce, reate, weft of hair, etc. The style is often either too compressed or too redundant to be clear, and the grammatical construction is sometimes not to be made out readily. Then again, the poem is full of subtle suggestions and delicate discriminations, which are but obscurely hinted at, and which richly repay careful study. Such study is further made more difficult by some of the pages being crowded with names either slightly known in history or else wholly fictitious but spoken of as if perfectly familiar to the reader. Perhaps the difficulty which would most trouble any one who reads this poem for the first time, is that the order of narration is often inverted, and is interrupted midway by a digression of fifteen pages, describing a visit of the spirit of humanity to the poet as he sat planning this work on the steps of a ruined palace, where

"Venice seems a type
Of Life—twixt blue and blue extends, a stripe,
As Life, the somewhat, hangs twixt naught and naught!"

Nettleship, in his "Essays on Robert Browning's Poetry," gives a thorough analysis of this digression, which closes with a legend of John the Evangelist who, when banished from Antioch to Patmos,

“ Set apart the closing eve
To comfort those his exile most would grieve,”

namely, the family of Xanthus; but as he entered his disciple's house the apostle saw a picture, at the sight of which

“ Dead swooned he, woke
Anon, heaved sigh, made shift to gasp, heart-broke :
‘ Get thee behind me, Satan ! have I toiled
To no more purpose ? Is the gospel foiled
Here too, and o'er my son's, my Xanthus' hearth,
Portrayed with sooty garb and features swarth—
Ah, Xanthus, am I to thy roof beguiled
To see the—the—the Devil domiciled ?’
Whereto sobbed Xanthus : ‘ Father, 'tis yourself
Installed, a limning which our outmost pelf
Went to procure against to-morrow's loss ;
And that's no twy-prong, but a pastoral cross
You're painted with.’ ”

The principal defect of the poem, besides its obscurity, is its undue partiality for the Church of Rome. There is no mention of the fact that many of the Tuscan towns had already offered fierce opposition to her tyranny, as did most of the free cities of Germany. Dante, devout Catholic and pure patriot as he was, rejected the temporal authority of the popes with all his sternness. So in reality did Sordello, who seems to have been somewhat noted as a Ghibelline champion. And, certainly, Browning does no justice to Frederic the Second. This emperor gave full tolerance and protection

to his Jewish and Moslem subjects, endowed professorships of Hebrew, Greek and Arabic at Salerno, spoke Italian, German, Latin, French, Arabic, and apparently even Greek, made a treaty with the Sultan which threw Jerusalem open to Christian pilgrims, founded the Universities of Naples and Padua, had Aristotle translated into Latin, encouraged free trade and the emancipation of the peasantry from serfdom, made laws protecting the chastity of women, abolished feudal and ecclesiastical tribunals, established parliaments in which the middle class was represented, and raised Sicily and Southern Italy, where he had more power than in the rest of the empire, to a prosperity enjoyed by no other country in Europe. Thus he was much more truly the champion of peace, freedom and culture than were the popes who opposed his plans and stirred up his subjects to rebellion, at the same time that they forbade King John to keep his oath to carry out the Great Charter of the liberties of England, and advised Henry III to feign observance of this solemn covenant until he could renounce it successfully. These pontiffs, who were Sordello's contemporaries, are principally noted, however, for their zeal in urging on those crusades which sent the flower of European chivalry to perish uselessly in Syria and Egypt, and which laid waste the fairest region of France, the cradle of modern literature, of artistic industry, and of enlightened Christianity.

Browning could not have given such a favorable view of these popes, if he had taken any note of the sufferings inflicted during a war of thirty-five years on millions of peaceable, industrious and intelligent Provençals by hordes of ruffians who always rejoiced greatly when they saw their prisoners burnt alive, as sometimes happened to hundreds at once, and who spared neither women nor children, but massacred every human creature they found in Béziers, to the number, as was boasted, of a hundred thousand, while the ferocious monks shouted:

“ Kill all ! God will know his own ! ”

Meantime the popes rewarded the perpetrators of these and yet fouler atrocities by pardoning all their sins, and forbade them even to keep faith with heretics. And among the encouragers of this wickedness must be included one of the great men of the age, St. Dominic, about whom nothing is said in “Sordello,” while there is only a bare mention of St. Francis. It is certainly singular that an author who makes so much note of insignificant details of the political and literary history of the opening years of the thirteenth century should say so little about the famous Albigensian war and the establishment of the two great mendicant orders. Perhaps we should not wonder that a weak visionary fails to see where his services belong and so perishes miserably, but it is not right that the reader should be left in the same ignorance.

Otherwise the poem is not without historic basis. There actually was a poet named Sordello, but he did not die at thirty, and he was not the son of Salin-guerra Torello. The latter's life, however, is given accurately in most respects. The heroine was really the Cunizza whom Dante places in his third heaven, but Browning confounds her with her half-sister, Palma, because the latter name is more euphonious. Many particulars about her lover may be found in Tiraboschi (*Storia della Letteratura Italiana*, Tomo iv, pag. 531, Milano: 1823), and also in Longfellow's notes on the "Purgatorio," before whose gate Dante meets his forerunner. Some account of the latter's poetry is given by Millot (*Histoire Littéraire des Troubadours*, Paris: 1774, Tome ii, p. 79), and also by Rutherford (*The Troubadours: Their Loves and their Lyrics*. London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1873, pp. 48, 65-7). Thirty-four of Sordello's poems are extant, some satirical and others amorous. All are in Provençal, but he seems to have also written in his native Italian. Some of these pieces are so good that it is strange that Browning did not translate or imitate any of them, or introduce a single real song into a poem where there are several minstrels. He seems to have been satisfied with endowing his troubadour with too luxuriant an imagination and too weak a will for him to be able to express himself adequately. How well Sordello really wrote may be judged from the

specimens given by Rutherford and Millot. From the latter's version in modern French I take these lines :

“I love a lady, fair without a peer,
Serve her I'd rather, though she ne'er requite
My love, than give myself to other dames,
However richly they might pay their knight.
Requite me not? Nay. He who serves a dame
Whose honor, grace and virtue shine like day,
Can do no service which the very joy
Of doing doth not bounteously repay.
For other recompense I will not pine,
But should it come, her pleasure still is mine.”

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